



MS. RATAN SHASTRI

Recipient of Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Development & Welfare of Women and Children-1990

Born in a middle class family of a school teacher, Ratan Shastri was brought up with that blending of affection and discipline which is congenial for the development of a rounded personality. She could get little formal education owing to her early marriage but she is a true example of education as the “manifestation of perfection already in man.”

That is why when her husband resigned from the prestigious post of Secretary in Home and Foreign Department of former Jaipur State, with a view to take up a programme of village reconstruction in a small, remote backward village, she welcomed the move and stood by him in all the troubles and tribulations.

For seven years Shastri made Banasthali, a very small village, far away from any town and which could be reached only by a bullock cart, their field of activity. There, they trained a group of like minded workers for taking up similar programme in other villages.

Giving up purdah and ornaments in Rajasthan of those times (1929) by a middle class woman in itself was an act of great courage. Creating an example for others and persuading others to do so was a great achievement. A number of women workers were thus prepared to take up work in society in those difficult days.

The programme that the Shastris took up in the village involved Khadi and self-reliance, literacy and medical relief, social and political awakening. An institution called Jiwan Kutir was founded by the Shastris in 1929 for rural reconstruction work and for training of workers for similar work in other parts of the country.

The Shastris lost their daughter, Shanta, at the tender age of 12. Shanta had evinced a great interest in teaching young children and wanted a room for her school for which she had even prepared 600 mud bricks with her own hands. Ratanji took upon herself the task of translating Shanta's dream into reality.

This was the genesis of the Banasthali Vidyapith for which Ratan Shastri has earned fame. The Vidyapith, a national institute for education and training of women was founded in 1935. While being busy with this newly started venture, Shastri also took a leading part in organising the Jaipur Satyagraha.

The Vidyapith is a unique centre for learning, from the Nursery to the Post-graduate stage, offering to girls, modern education without sacrificing India's basic cultural tradition. Some of its significant aspects are:

- It emphasizes a harmonious synthesis of the spiritual and scientific values of East and West;
- It inculcates faith in democratic values and in the essential unity of all religions and fostering a spirit of national integration alongwith that of international goodwill and understanding.

Community life in the hostels and studying together under a common educational programme of students speaking different languages and belonging to different castes, creeds and religions provide a very natural environment for inculcating the above faith.

The educational thinking and programme of the Vidyapith is based on the principles of progressive education. It has developed its programme of Panchmukhi Shiksha consisting of Physical, Practical, Aesthetic, and varied range of co-curricular activities (like Sanganeri Printing, Clay-modelling, Papier-Mache, Batik, Yogic Asanas, Swimming, Boating, Cycling, Riding, Flying, Shooting, Kathak, Manipuri, Bharatnatyam Dances), providing the students with a number of alternatives means to their personality development.

The social, practical and productive aspects of education are equally emphasized. Work-experience and social service are given their due place in the Vidyapith's educational programme.

When the Vidyapith was established in 1935 bringing out girls from secluded homes and providing them general education in itself was a stupendous task. However, even then the Vidyapith had aimed at providing the girls with an education which will enable them to secure a place of honour and equality in the society. In the changed context this means that the girls should not simply be provided with general education but they should be given education which will enable them to compete on equal terms in a society which is becoming more and more competitive.

The Vidyapith is deeply conscious of the crisis of values that mark the modern society. In its opinion education is one of the potent instruments for trying to meet this crisis. Hence the Vidyapith's whole educational effort and programme have in view this imperative need of creating proper sense of values among the students. In this context, it emphasizes a harmonious synthesis of the spiritual and scientific values of East and West, simple and natural living and an attempt to strike a balance between individual freedom and social responsibility held towards achieving the above objects.

Thus Banasthali's work in the field of women's education has been of a special type. It cannot be classified as routine type of work. It cannot also be classified as social welfare type of work. It is a unique blending of the two types.

The Vidyapith has now been declared to be an institution deemed to be University. Shastri has been a member of several prominent State and Central level Boards and Committees in the field of social welfare and education.

Awards/Prizes, etc received earlier.: Padma Shri (1955) and Padma Bhushan (1975)

